

# The Color Book:

A Dance Narrative about Colorism from the African American  
Female Perspective

Brianna Rhodes

Senior Distinction Project

Advisors: Crystal Michelle Perkins & Daniel Roberts

## Introduction

*The Color Book* made its debut in the Senior Concert, March 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019 in the Barnett Theatre at the Ohio State University. It is a two-part dance narrative about colorism from the African American female perspective. The first section that I performed in is entitled *Foreword*. It is a three-minute solo performed to a live spoken word artist. The second section, entitled *Chapter One*, is a six-minute work performed by the ensemble. *The Color Book* identifies the stereotypes associated with skin color on the black spectrum to celebrate black female life through dance. Upon its completion, *The Color Book* attempted to reconstruct the image of Black women in dance by understanding their existence and reclaiming their identity.

Before the creating process began, I generated a set of goals to help set the environment for the piece to grow in. These goals 1) defined the term colorism, 2) described how colorism affects the African American community, 3) informed individuals in the Black dance community of the hidden rhetoric used by the black community towards race, color, and identity, and 4) educated, uplifted, and empowered women of all shades through celebration of Black life.

## Description of Research

My research for *The Color Book* depended heavily on the information I learned in academic coursework, personal experiences, and dancer's personal narratives. The research focused on theories of colorism that includes passing ideology, oppressive racial systems, the sub-optimal/optimal conceptual theory, and the Willie Lynch theory. Later in my paper, I will explain how this research was used to dissect the dancer's own identity to create movement and choreographic motifs. In terms of movement generation, the dancers created solos which unveiled their own experience with race. I also introduced African concepts lost within today's American society throughout the work. With my knowledge from an African Civilization class I

took, I incorporated concepts of African royalty, clothing, and community. I also utilized African movement patterns like “the circle” and sacred washing of the performance space to generate a loving, unified, and supporting community. By the completion of *The Color Book*, I learned more about my own identity, which I struggled with for years. Additionally, I learned that some dancers agreed with the overall goal of this work, but others did not. I realized throughout the process that identity is complicated because some of my dancers walked away even more confused with their identity.

### **Critical Analysis**

For starters, it is important to define the meaning of colorism because it is not commonly known among society. Colorism is a social theory defined in conjunction with shadeism as the prejudice or discrimination against individuals with a dark skin tone, typically among people of the same ethnic or racial group. Colorism causes complications between people because some people are treated differently based on the social meanings attached to their skin color. Throughout most of my life, this word did not exist to me. During autumn 2017, I was experiencing my own battle with race. In this war against my identity and societal standards, I realized how important it was to find a solution and understand the complex structure surrounding identity.

Colorism was brought to the forefront of my life because I learned how people within the black community used it as a silent mechanism to emotionally and psychologically destroy the positive black identity. As a young black girl growing up in a predominantly black community, my friends would tell me to stay out of the sun because I would get too dark. I feared getting darker than my natural brown skin which eventually affected my idea of beauty. When I started dating, I noticed how my complexion affected my relationships. I was in a relationship with a

guy who told me I was the darkest person he ever dated. One man in particular left me for a lighter skinned Black girl because he thought that light skinned women were prettier than dark skinned women. Experiences like this made me feel like I was not beautiful because I did not have light skin, pretty eyes, and long curly hair. I realized that beauty was centered around light/fair skin as beautiful.

Recently, I experienced the same kind of hateful rhetoric from my own family. My aunt told me that I was only successful in my dance career because I was light skinned. The comment implied that I had some form of “light” privilege. “Light” privilege, as a term, comes from the passing theory in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It gave light skin African Americans the privilege to pass as white to reach better opportunities, which the Black community at large did not have access to. Animosity rose among the Black population because many people believed that light skin Blacks were abusing the system to help themselves and not the community. My aunts comment hurt me because it negated the hard work I have put into my career and suggested I achieved that through some form of “light” privilege. From this moment, and countless others, I felt driven to explore and educate myself on colorism and how it affects the black woman. I used my personal experiences to inspire this project. I looked for components that would highly impact myself, the dancers, and the audience. I am pushing towards work rooted in social justice without projecting the “angry black female” stereotype.

I had recently been involved in a production entitled *Inside the Riot*. This production goes behind the scenes of an equal rights protest in the African American community. From this production, there was a choreo-poem entitled *Rules* that became the track for *Foreword*. This poem serves as a list of commands that one would say to themselves to survive in American

society as a Black person. I hired a spoken word artist to make *Foreword* more impactful. I created movement specific to the words in the poem. One moment that speaks to me states:

*“Be Body, and twisted and never on the news,*

*Be nice “for a black girl”*

*Be “cute for a gay one”*

...

*Be slick, Be clever*

*Be mastering how to change your skin*

...

*Be stonewall or Ferguson”*

I identify with this text because I am a Black woman who is a part of the LGBTQ+ community. This part of my identity connects to experiences with colorism through sexuality. The movement in *Foreword* focused on specific gestures like pointing towards my arms to showcase my skin color. I caressed my body to emphasize my sexuality but also my curves which are oversexualized in society. I also held up the “Black Power” fist to emphasize my fight for equal rights. Following this moment in the solo, I would suddenly walk away and fall down to juxtapose the next line of the poem - “solidarity with so many Blacks, even though so many Blacks stand in solidarity against you.” This irony of movement and text showcased the fight for Black rights against white society and the black community, while fighting for the Black community as they fight against you.

*Chapter One*, which is the ensemble work, generated movement differently. *The Color Book’s* dance community consisted of women who identified with African lineage: ten dancers, a spoken word artist, an assistant, and a lighting designer. My rehearsals started mid-October in

2018, with 2-hour rehearsals twice a week. At the start of the first rehearsal, I asked my dancers a series of questions to grasp a better understanding of their identity and how they viewed themselves. These questions include, “Have you heard of the word colorism before?”, “Do you know what this word means?”, and “How do you identify as a person in this world?”

After this discussion, I told my dancers my goals for this work and proceeded to teach them about colorism and the knowledge I learned. In my *Slavery in the U.S.* class, I learned (in depth) about racism. Racism, where colorism stems from, transcended through slavery at the peak of the Atlantic Slave Trade towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Caribbean, home to the most successful European powers of the slave trade, catapulted the Atlantic Slave Trade to transport 12.5 million Africans to the “New” world. In Barbados 1661, the Portuguese implemented the first set of slave codes. These codes reconstructed and then applied by the U.S Virginian government in 1705, became the first comprehensive slave codes in the British colonies. These laws made the terms “slave” and “black” synonymous which restricted black life from then on.

Through online research and discussions, I learned about the Willie Lynch theory. Today, this theory creates a debate around its authenticity because it is unclear who wrote it and when it was written. While it has been rejected among modern day historians, the theory migrated through public Black schools and literature. This theory has affected the African American community by changing the dialogue between fellow Blacks. This controversial piece of writing constructed the house slave and the field slave debate. A field slave was a dark skin toned African/African American, working in the fields of the plantation starting in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. House slaves were descendants of rape between a black female slave and a white male plantation owner. It was believed, among the slave population, that these children received benefits because

they were kin to the white family. Some of these benefits were as small as more food or as large as the learning how to read and/or write which was illegal during this time.

I used this information in various ways during the choreographic process. I instructed the dancers to recall a time when they may have experienced colorism. I left the concept open-ended because I realized they were still unfamiliar with the term. I gave them the freedom to recall moments dealing with race with white vs. black people, and black people within the black color spectrum. After a few minutes, I asked the dancers to write down these memories. Once they finished, I told them to not discuss their stories because we were going to use those narratives to create the movement for their solos.

The movement created from their solos served as motifs – a distinctive feature or dominant idea in an artistic or literary composition. The solos consisted of four, eight counts of movement that originated in the dancer's personal dance aesthetic. Their solos were then taught with the notion to empathize with that person's story. One example is centered around one of my dancer's movement in a weighted lunge that chugged through space. The right hands' palm faced the forehead with the fingers extending outward and the left hand was placed on the chest. This piece of choreography is meant to represent emotional strain on a person with a trajectory at the mind and the heart. This specific move showcased unity among the dancers because they gravitated around a common struggle with their identity. That common ground is being judged by their own community based on the lightness/darkness of their skin.

Structurally, these solos served as a powerplay against the passing theory I have discussed previously. Systematically, light/fair skinned dancers receive more opportunities to dance on stage like leading roles in prestigious ballets. Some dark-skinned dancers are pushed towards ensemble work or not considered at all. For *The Color Book*, I wanted to fight that.

While all dancers created a solo, I specifically used dark skin and light skin dancers to have solo moments throughout the piece. I also chose to leave the entire ensemble onstage when a solo was present to counteract the ideology of light skin as supreme. Furthermore, this contributed to the community aspect in African traditions which was important in the creation of my work. I speak on this community aspect later in the paper when I talk about African concepts I used.

While there were many positive strides during *The Color Book*'s creation, not all dancers agreed with the trajectory. One dancer found it hard to resonate with the work because she felt like she did not belong. Given her ethnic background, she is of African lineage, however, she gravitated towards her other ethnicity which made her feel lost in her identity. In the Results section, I explain her reasoning for feeling this way.

As stated before, my research stemmed from my academic classes taught in the *African American and African Studies* department. At the start of my work, I was taking a class called *Psychology of the Black Experience*. In this class, I learned about the sub-optimal and optimal conceptual theories. Society exists in the sub-optimal world view which focuses on the individual prevailing in a world focused around -ism's, i.e. racism, sexism, colorism, ageism, heterosexism, colonialism, capitalism. This mindset implements negative constructs of identity which makes acquiring a positive identity harder to achieve. It alienates the person from themselves and society and creates a negative image. Primarily within the Black community, our image of blackness is constructed around societies implications of blackness as evil, ugly, exotic, foreign, wrong, backwards etc. According to Dr. Linda Myers, teacher and author of *Identity Development and Worldview: Towards an Optimal Conceptualization*, explains the importance of changing one's viewpoint from the sub optimal world view to the optimal world view. Through this change will there be a shift towards a positive black identity.



The optimal conceptual theory changes the individual by introducing a strong sense of self through love, community, and a higher being. With this knowledge, I taught my dancers that the first way to achieving a positive sense of self is by acknowledging a change of mind. Actively shifting their mind from the sub-optimal world view to the optimal world view rids them of the self-alienating oppressive systems like racism and colorism, holding one back from themselves.

I used this new conceptual theory to change the dynamics of the dancer's solos. Through a workshop to work on dynamics, I put the dancers through emotional and mental stress from the comments they received towards their color. Simone Burnett, a freshman dancer, used movement that kept her stationary in one place. I proceeded to say comments (that she heard used against her), in order to fire up an emotion in her body and see if it affected her movement. I then told her to move away from me because, at the moment, I symbolized the hate that kept her rooted to her spot. She then extended her arms to the sky with her legs in an "X" formation, and leaped away from me, hitting the floor, and swiveling down to the ground. I then asked her how she felt, and she explained how she felt angry because the comments did not define her.

This situation was one of many where I challenged the dancers to move away from the negative constructs associated with their identity. Most times it worked while other times it did not because some dancers were still unsure of their identity. As emotionally charged this moment seemed, it would not have been obtainable if I did not create a safe space for the dancers to create. To create such a safe space, I introduced African concepts of community.

In many West African cultures, elders clean the space, through dance and/or song, to make the environment sacred for the community. *Forward* served as the cleansing of the space within the larger work for the ensemble in *Chapter One*. Within the rehearsals, I incorporated the

value of community through an emphasis on “the circle”. The “circle” keeps energy alive and shifting. Just like I discussed in the optimal conceptual theory, understanding that energy is constantly moving reinstates the positive sense of self. I was actively reconstructing in my rehearsals the correlation between “black” and “slave” with “black energy” and “positivity.”

Choreographically, the piece invited a series of circles that went through dynamic shifts. By the finished product, the transition from *Forward* to *Chapter One*, started the encircling concept. The group walked in and sat down facing each other in a circle. The circle expands to the dancers moving as a unit throughout the stage to then disperse. By the height of the work, the dancers crawl to center stage, helping each other up to form a circle facing outward. Once they face out, there is a ripple starting with the head of one dancer, as she places her head on the next dancer’s shoulder. From there, the circle expands as they break out into their solos and the piece comes to a close with their arms and chest toward the sky.

Additionally, I implemented traditional West African styles of movement. Throughout my dance career at the Ohio State University, I have taken a series of African dance classes along with Horton technique classes intertwined with West African movement. Through a workshop, I technically worked with the dancers to find the “knee to chest” connection which gave them a grounded sense of weight. I also introduced Chicago style House footwork that served as the underlining bodily rhythm throughout the work. This correlated well with the music used in *Chapter One*, which is produced by Black Coffee, a prominent South African record producer and DJ.

During the designing phase of the costumes, I interwoven African concepts of royalty. I wanted to acknowledge the dancer’s beauty by considering their skin color and body shapes while emphasizing their grace. The dancers wore long purple dresses that had an uneven hem.

Purple, symbolizing royalty among many African communities, heavily laid across their bodies, so the dress wrapped around them as they turned. Their shoulders, arms, and neckline were exposed showing the lines of their body and muscle structure. The *pièce de résistance* came from the commonly used African headwear, consisting of purple, gold, and green. The dancers wore the headscarf which provided class, elegance, and uniformity within the strong community of Black women.

## Results

Following the last performance of *The Color Book*, I conducted exit interviews with the dancers from three things: 1) What was your story and how has your experience effected your intention and perspective of the piece, 2) has this work allowed you to view yourself differently as a woman of color, and 3) what knowledge have you grasped from this process?

Many of my dancers have mixed identities like black & white, black & Asian, black & Indian, and Latina. A freshman dancer named Thaliyah Cools-Lartigue, stated in her interview that her mother and father are black, but her stepdad is white. She is currently in an interracial relationship. Her view of relationships has been black and white, so stepping into this process introduced her to colorism and how it has affected her. With the knowledge she learned in the piece, she brought that into her relationship and educated her partner on a strong topic that has affected her blindly for years.

Marissa Thomas, who I referred to earlier as the dancer who struggled with her identity, found this piece hard to resonate with. She is of Asian and African descent, but she identifies prominently with her Asian heritage. While she is proud of her Black heritage, she stated how she always felt like she did not belong among the Black community because she was not “fully” Black. Marissa’s struggle highlights a common problem among mixed children. They are never

enough for either side and/or constantly find themselves having to choose a side. For Marissa, it was hard for her to fully give in to this piece. She had not taken on her Black identity fully because she was a mixed child who emphasized her Asian heritage. Overall, she understood what this work has done for the group and how it created a community of diverse people, but she did not understand how it benefited her completely.

One main thing I have learned through this process is that identity is a tough subject to talk about. For me, I have been constantly battling with my identity and I still am at the age of twenty-two. Things will not change overnight, but *The Color Book* got people talking about colorism. As Marissa stated in her interview, colorism is not at the top of society's agenda. My response to her comment is "You're right. It's not," however, *The Color Book* made it a part of this community. It served its purpose to inform those on the hidden rhetoric of colorism to reconstruct and reclaim the African American female identity. We have a long way to go, but I can say my goals were accomplished and I still have more to unveil.

### **Afterword/Conclusion**

Colorism shaped Black societies because Black people have little to no knowledge of its existence. *The Color Book* has not only educated the dancers and community on a system affecting them but has allowed them to look at their own situations and reflect on how they have been affected. No matter the color, people do not talk about problems of race because it is complicated and systematic. But to make change, society must educate itself on the tribulations that stop a community from growing. We, as black people, cannot be pushed down anymore, especially by our own people. We all have a different story, but it overlaps when we come together as one. *The Color Book* provided my dancers with a space to explore their identities. I

disrupted color hierarchies by allowing all dancers a moment to shine regardless of who society believed should be showcased. And I also informed people on Black female life through joy!

### **Future Goals**

This piece helped me take ownership of my own identity. I understand now that I must be a part a dance company that is diverse in religion, sexuality, and ethnicity. The company must create work focused on social justice. Furthermore, by researching the topic of colorism, I have realized the importance of such a topic among Black youth. In the future, I plan to go to graduate school and receive my master's in dance. I wish to write a book that portrays the concept of colorism from an African American female dancer's perspective and title it *The Color Book*.

The Black community is extremely affected by this social theory. Our self-esteem is challenged because our identity is written for us. Whether they know it or not, colorism has blossomed and affected each of us in a way that stops us from fully being successful. Sometimes it is rooted in the bitter hatred for ourselves, or it has shifted into Black alienation by implementing systems similar to white society but with Black faces. Whatever the case, colorism must be discussed because it is a racial system used to further divide a community that is oppressed. I WILL be a part of those conversations because I want to bring unity to my community.

Following is a YouTube Link to the finished product of *The Color Book*:

<https://youtu.be/gNCqi8kqDso>